

No longer invisible

Domestic workers fight back globally

Worldwide domestic workers face miserable work conditions and pay and a woeful lack of respect. **Chris Bonner** speaks of a new project driven by the global food union to put domestic workers' struggles firmly on the map.

Domestic work accounts for a large percentage of women's work across the world and it is growing. In South Africa, where domestic work has declined, it still accounts for 7% of total employment, and 16% of women's employment. A recent report from the *Human Rights Watch* notes that half the estimated world's 200 million migrant workers are women and a large percentage are domestic workers. In the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, for example, 60-75% of legal migrants are women, the majority also domestic workers.

In November 2006, the Dutch FNV trade union federation hosted

an international conference in Amsterdam with the theme Protection for Domestic Workers. Some 60 representatives of domestic workers' trade unions, associations, regional and international networks, global and national trade unions, and supportive non-governmental organisations (NGOs) attended the conference. The recently formed International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) was present and fully supportive of the initiative.

The conference formulated a statement that expressed outrage at the exploitation of domestic workers across the globe and particularly of highly vulnerable illegal migrant workers and children. This included the lack of recognition of the contribution that domestic workers make which results in many countries' failure to recognise domestic work as work under employment legislation.

The conference demanded that there be decent work for all domestic workers and resolved to continue organising and networking globally. It agreed to set up an interim working group to explore the potential for an international network to carry out the necessary practical activities. The network would be open to all organisations, trade unions, associations, networks and NGOs who agree to work for the common aim of achieving the rights of, and respect for, all domestic workers.

The working group will also explore, in collaboration with global

unions, the possibility for an ILO Convention on the rights of domestic workers, national or migrant. It will support the organisation of domestic workers at all levels by, for example, encouraging the involvement of trade unions, ensuring research and information sharing and highlighting domestic workers' rights through events such as an international domestic worker day.

THE GOOD NEWS

At the Conference we heard about the harsh working conditions of domestic workers – the vast majority women. We found that their problems were similar. Whether the workers are employed locally or have migrated from rural areas to cities or from country to country, they face isolation at work, low wages and long hours. Often they have no contract of employment and are at the beck and call of their employer. Some suffer abuse and harassment.

Migrant workers have additional problems such as the threat of deportation if they are undocumented, or if they lose their jobs. Child domestic work is rife in many countries. It is often unpaid and unrecognised as work. In some cases, parents 'sell' their children to relatives or to traffickers. In some countries domestic workers are not regarded as workers and therefore are excluded from labour law. In other countries labour law provisions are inferior for domestic

workers. Where domestic workers do have legal rights and protections, such as in South Africa, these rights are difficult to enforce.

THE GOOD NEWS

But we also heard good news. Self-organisation amongst domestic workers is growing. And unions, the ILO, NGOs and other institutions are recognising the need for domestic workers to get organised so that they can improve their working conditions and lives, and have the respect and rights that they deserve.

In Asia, migrant and local domestic workers have created many different organisations. They have formed trade unions, such as the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) in Hong Kong (see box). They recently formed a regional network across several countries for local, adult domestic workers - Asia Domestic Workers Network (ADWN). In 2004, domestic workers in China formed their first trade union, the Xi An Domestic Worker's Union. But, because it is often difficult to form unions, domestic workers are also organising through NGOs and cultural groups.

In Latin America there is a long history of domestic workers organising. The Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Household Workers (CONLACTRAHO) is a regional network of domestic worker unions and associations. It has member organisations from 14 Latin American and Caribbean countries. Its former president is now a minister in the new Bolivian government.

In Europe, as domestic work grows, trade unions are taking an interest. Many are particularly concerned at the plight of migrant domestic workers. In the Netherlands, ABVAKABO, an affiliate of the FNV, has recently started to

William Mattiata



organise migrants. In 2005, the European Trades Union Confederation, ETUC, hosted a conference on the role of trade unions in organising and protecting domestic workers in Europe.

BAD NEWS IN AFRICA

Unfortunately in Africa, although domestic work is widespread in rich and poor homes, organisation is not well developed. Unlike Asia and Latin America, there is no regional network, and there is little contact between existing unions and organisations.

The South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) is probably the largest union of domestic workers in Africa.

INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS' UNION

Sartiwen Binti Sanbardi is president of the Hong Kong based Indonesian Migrant Workers' Union. A domestic worker herself, she is fighting to improve the living and working conditions of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong.

"I started to work as a domestic in 1992 in Singapore, and stayed there for six years. I came to Hong Kong in 1998, but was dismissed by my employer, who was experiencing some financial difficulties. He gave me no compensation. I was very worried: if I didn't find another employer I would have to go back home within two weeks according to the law, but I didn't have the money to pay for the trip.

I saw some union activists in a park. I asked them for assistance and they supported me, helping me to win the case against my former employer (who had to pay my last month's salary and cover

the cost of my plane ticket). I managed to find another employer and then I became a member of the IMWU. I hadn't yet joined when the new employer contracted me. It would perhaps have frightened him off because, according to the labour laws in Hong Kong, domestic workers have a right to unionise and if they are sacked on these grounds the employer is liable to a pay a fine of HK\$100 000 (9700 euros).

Since I'm a full-time domestic worker, I use my days off to work for the union organisation. I have a good employer, but many other migrants don't have the same luck. That's why I work for the organisation rather than taking rest when I have time off. It gives me a great deal of satisfaction."

Sartiwen Binti Sanbardi, participated in the Conference. This is an extract from an interview. See <http://www.ituc-csi.org/spip.php?article472>



Chris Bonner

Participants at the FNV conference on Protection for Domestic Workers

The Conservation, Hotels, Domestic and Allied Workers Union (CHODAWU) in Tanzania is also actively organising domestic workers and has around 4 500 members. It runs an extensive and successful programme with the ILO for child domestic workers. On the other hand, the Namibian Domestic and Allied Workers Union has struggled to keep alive. In 2003 it ceased operating due to resource problems, with the Namibia Farmworkers Union (NFAWU) taking over the administration and task of organising domestic workers.

As a first step towards networking in Africa, those present at the conference are busy identifying domestic worker unions and organisations across the continent.

Organising domestic workers is not easy. Due to their isolation at work, fear of losing jobs, limited free time and low wages it is difficult to build sustainable organisations. We heard stories of how unions had collapsed due to unstable membership, financial problems and lack of support from mainstream trade unions. We also heard how, despite the odds, domestic workers had fought back and reorganised, as they did in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

Domestic work is generally invisible yet millions of women and children are involved in it and are without a voice. With this in mind, the global union, IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant,

Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations) has agreed to take the lead in developing an international programme of work for domestic workers' rights. It is setting up a special project and will raise funds and resources. In March 2007, the IUF Women's Conference strongly supported the project, and included it in its programme of action, which was then adopted by the IUF Congress. ITUC, together with global unions PSI (Public Sector International) and UNI (Union Network International), have committed to participate in the project and to give it full support.

"Household workers are invisible and we have to use our imagination to help them organise," said Marcelina Bautista, secretary general of CONLACTRAHO in Latin America. Domestic workers will need all the assistance they can get in their local, national and international organising efforts. Global and national trade unions have a special role to play. They have organising experience and resources. They have access to national policy and legislative forums and they have formal status within the ILO. Global unions have expressed their support. What is needed now is action on the ground if this international initiative is to succeed.

For further information, and a preliminary report on the Conference visit www.irene-network.nl For the ETUC conference report 'Out of the Shadows: Organising and protecting domestic workers in Europe: the role of trade unions', November 2005, see www.etuc.org/a/2809

Chris Bonner, WIEGO's (Women in Informal Employment Globalising & Organising) Organisation and Representation Programme Director, was part of the planning group and attended the conference.

FIGHTING BACK AND REORGANISING: SADSAWU

"We had to do it ourselves, Sadwu (SA Domestic Workers Union) was forced to close down in 1996 due to financial problems. But when we closed we decided that this was not the end, we would form a new union. So, we elected ten of our people to mobilise for a new union. We had no offices or anything so we organised from our rooms, from our houses and we used our employers' telephones.

At this stage we got no support from Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) or the affiliated unions. We had to show them that domestic workers really needed a union, that we were determined. We had expected Cosatu and the unions to help us find a home, but when they failed to do so we turned to others for help. We managed to get a donation from the Canadians that paid for an office within Community House in Cape Town. The South African Communist Party (SACP), NGOs and individuals came to our assistance and helped us with office equipment and small donations. Then Cosatu the regional office let us use their fax and photocopying facilities. Later on they offered us space in their offices and we moved there.

Sadsawu was officially launched in 2000 and we now have 25 000 signed up members across the country."

Hester Stephens, domestic worker and president of the South African Domestic, Service and Allied Worker's Union (Sadsawu)